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Dice Hearts And Other Islands

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DICE HEARTS AND OTHER ISLANDS

by

Bailey O'Brien

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English)

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Abstract

This collection of fiction, cumulatively *Dice Hearts and Other Islands*, explores both the isolation of islands and the connections that can be made between them. While these islands can be the physical landmasses of the sea, in this collection islands also refer to the isolated selves of the characters. Inspired by Elizabeth Strout's narrative style in her novel *Olive Kitteridge*, the short stories in this collection similarly unveil the two main characters through stories bridged with connections. The latter half of this collection, a play and a monologue, are influenced by the playwright John Cariani. As are the topics of several of his plays, these pieces focus on the connections between people and how these bridges are created and sustained.

While isolation may be craved, these characters continuously find themselves longing for a bridge.

Table of Contents

ARTIST’S STATEMENT	1
THE STORIES	5
DICE HEARTS	5
IN A TREE	8
HELP WANTED	11
BOAT RIDE	16
DICE HEARTS II	20
THE SCENES	23
EAVESDROPPING: A MONOLOGUE	23
ALICE & BILL	25
WORKS CITED	36
ARTIST’S BIOGRAPHY	37

Artist's Statement

I am no stranger to islands. My father's side of the family has deep roots in Peaks Island, Maine, a small island in Casco Bay that serves as an annex to Portland. My mother hails from Presque Isle, a rural farming town in northern Maine, which literally translates to "almost an island," despite its distance from the ocean. These islands, both partial and whole, are defined based on their relationship with the water surrounding them and the land from which they are separated. In other words, islands are only islands because they lack connections; they are isolated. To start, the land itself is distant and requires some amount of effort to reach. This dissuades visitors from making contact with the island. When someone makes this journey, she has nobly chosen to forge a connection rather than to remain disconnected. However, it takes just as much effort to leave an island as it does to arrive at one, so the likelihood of isolation is two-fold. People are isolated in the same way. Each person is her own island, separated from every other person by the waters of her individual perspective, the most divisive human force. A connection only happens when an effort is made to bridge the gap between the two islands. That is precisely what this collection of writing addresses.

The first section, "The Stories," is a compilation of interconnecting stories featuring two main characters throughout their lives. If people are islands, then stories are islands as well. By bridging the stories through theme, character, and memory, the space between the stories is no longer a means of isolation, but of connection. I was first introduced to this idea when Pulitzer Prize-winning author Elizabeth Strout visited my

Introduction to Creative Writing class during my freshman year. Her book, *Olive Kitteridge*, is a collection of stories involving the title character, Olive, in some capacity, whether the story is told from her perspective or whether she is simply mentioned in passing. All of these stories together allow for a deeper development of her character than any one story alone could have accomplished. The stories in my collection share a similar goal of direct and indirect interconnection. My two main characters, though they have separate storylines, weave through the stories both as the narrators and secondary characters. In doing this, I hope to have written a collection of islands with enough bridges between them to create a larger, more meaningful, island.

In these stories, the characters seek out isolation, often literally escaping to an island, but they also must explore their relationships with others, either through direct interaction or internal contemplation. The climaxes of these stories are not high-intensity or action-based, but, rather, are quiet moments of change, connection, and disconnection. This style is inspired in part by the short story writer Ray Halliday, who recently visited the University of Maine's New Writing Series. While discussing his book, *The Kid That Even the Dogs Didn't Like*, Halliday explained that his characters all reach some moment of false epiphany in his stories, the flaws apparent only to the reader. I have loosely modeled the tension and subtle character development in this collection after his approach. In the quiet moments, my characters are faced with a choice: action or inaction, connection or disconnection, bridging the water or remaining isolated. These are the moments where the characters' flaws are most apparent, and these are the choices that define the characters throughout the rest of their stories.

The second section, “The Scenes,” continues to navigate the concept of isolation, but does so through different means and to different ends. These short scenes, which belong in separate plays, do not attempt to bridge the gaps between stories, but focus more closely on bridging the gaps between people. The bulk of interaction I have had with playwriting is through the work of John Cariani, the playwright of *Almost, Maine*, which I have read and seen performed numerous times. This play is comprised of a series of vignettes exploring the complexities of falling in and out of love, each scene focusing on the relationship between different pairs of characters. What Cariani does best is cleverly displace the true conflict of the scene onto something much smaller and more tangible. By doing this, he simplifies the problem without destroying any of its complexity. This is a mode of storytelling that I have tried to recreate in my own scenes, particularly “Alice and Bill.” These two characters may have a difficult time talking about change, but by relating it to a much more easily understood “thing,” like their flavor of jam, the realizations they share are easier to conceptualize.

This balance is also how Cariani is able to mix humor and poignancy. The difficult topics, like Cariani’s common theme of falling out of love, become laughable, at least temporarily, due to the unexpected displacement. Additionally, he writes dialogue that is fast-paced and repetitive, although somehow not oversimplified, which is ripe with the opportunity for humor. However, when there are pauses in dialogue, the true underlying emotion tends to take control of the scene. I aimed to capture a similar balance of lightness and heaviness. I have kept the dialogue simple, without minimizing the emotions of the characters, in order to emphasize the honesty of the displacement. I

used this honesty as a tool for building connections, or, perhaps more appropriately, reinforcing the connections between my characters, strengthening their bridges.

This collection is an island itself. It is connected to all of the pieces of writing that brought about its inspiration and development. It is also connected to the readers who choose to engage with it. It resists isolation.

The Stories

Dice Hearts

Ten more in the live-tank. He releases the trap and the line flies off the stern. He is still out in his boat, one triple left to haul. A salty cigarette dangles from his lips, vibrating in time with the motor. The engine roars as he takes *Dice Hearts* wide open.

The lobsters he can keep are just the legals. He flings back the shorts, each one returning to freedom. Every so often there's a cull, but because they're down a claw, he dumps them too. But about every pot, he hauls a berried female, her swollen abdomen teeming with dark, shiny eggs. He cuts a v-notch out of her tail to mark her as a breeder. This will save her from other lobstermen, from other traps. Before he lets go, he turns her over in his gloved hand and watches the thick web of berries clinging to her protection gleam in the sunlight. His stomach churns at the sight of them.

They won't find out. He's not sure what he would do if they did.

They wouldn't ask him why he had them, why he refused to give them back. He didn't want to sell them, which is what they would assume. He didn't want to harm them

or kill them or even keep them. All he wanted was to have them, to have something. He liked keeping what he found and saving what couldn't save itself.

He lives next to the dump. It hides in the center of the island, the ugly secret no one wants the tourists to know. It is a grave for the obsolete. His salty, dilapidated cottage is furnished solely with abandoned items from the dump. He often lugs wobbly tables and soggy seat cushions across the road, finding a home for them among his other reclaimed belongings. He has grown numb to the smell of mold mingling with cigarette smoke. Ashtrays, one in each room, are stuffed with the pale ghosts of his habit.

Headed toward his final buoy, he turns northwest. He brings his boat to the front side of the island, disturbing the out-of-staters with his motor's din. The lobsters scuttled in their purgatory.

He knows he can't keep them.

He sees his orange buoy winking in the distance.

He sipped his last drop of coffee at four-thirty that morning, the bitter liquid mingling with the turmoil in his gut. He usually drinks it on his bumpy drive to the dock, the steamy liquid sloshing onto his rubber fishing pants. Today he sipped it one molecule at a time while standing over his sink. The last swallows tasted like cooled spit. He set his empty mug on the counter delicately to preserve the silence. He sucked in a lungful of the smoky air and pivoted to the calendar pinned to the wall. There were nineteen slashes crossing out the days in July, a ritual he began as a child that had morphed into a countdown to freedom. Whenever that would be. A wave of guilt rolled through his stomach. He picked up his pen and slowly scratched a final, black line through day number twenty.

He grabbed his keys bound to their orange flotation device. He leaves.

He holds her in his hands and cups her swollen belly, filled with new life. He can't leave her this time. He already did that.

He was eighteen years old, and she was seventeen. That was his excuse.

"Too young, I'm too fucking young." So was she, she reminded him.

Her abdomen would expand and swell and teem and do all the things that happen when a woman is pregnant. And then they would have a baby.

Their baby. It too was just a seed then, one tiny bead of life.

He puts her back in the tank, with all the others. He pulls the keys from the ignition, killing the engine. The lobsters crawl in their cage, searching for a way out.

There isn't always a way out.

He thought there was, and that's why he left. That's why he ended up here, living in his dump home. He thought he was escaping.

He crosses the days off every morning, each mark a reminder of the time that had passed since he left. His daughter turns eighteen today.

He only kept the berried lobsters because he wants to save them. He wants to save the eggs. It is illegal. He knows that. He knows he has to give them back. He knows he can't really save them.

He didn't save her. He didn't do anything. He left.

She floats into a wave then makes her descent toward her home. There are seven more lobsters to be returned.

Their swollen girths disappear into the darkness of the water. He sets them free.

In a Tree

Another car door slams. Two visitors in black make their way down our unpaved driveway. From my tree, they are two more people wearing darkness, two more pitiful expressions, two more heads cocked to one side. The guests arrive at the front door as two others are leaving. The house inhales and exhales grief.

Without thinking, I pick away at the tree's coarse skin. Chunks of damp wood collect under my fingernails, the mark of my old habit.

I used the nailbrush from the guest bathroom to scrub away at the dirt. It left my skin chapped and red, but it made my nails clean and pink again. I put it back on its shelf, where it waited until the next time I needed it.

It has been three months since I've picked the tree until my fingertips bled. After the fight, I perched up here until the bark was thin and a veil of wood particles dusted the ground beneath where I sat. I had to wear band-aids on my right thumb and index finger for almost a week, and they were still tender for days after that.

But sometimes I come up here just to think. When the sun hits my bare legs and the breeze weaves through the leaves, I can forget that this is a place of pain, too.

Another couple departs. She folds a wet tissue into the creases of her hand and he is full of the deli meat platter that my aunt brought over. They had probably whispered to the other guests they recognized from the funeral wondering where I was. They probably asked my mother about me after patting her back, and she probably had to lie and say I was in my room, and that I would be down soon.

She knows where I am. This has been my spot since I was tall enough to reach the low-hanging branch. When I “ran away from home,” I grabbed the box of Lucky Charms from the cabinet and climbed until the branches concealed my dangling feet.

I didn’t start picking at the tree until I was older, though. Things didn’t get bad until high school. He lost his job the summer before ninth grade, but my mother and I didn’t know what that meant until later.

A thin spear of wood splinters itself under my thumbnail.

It wasn’t bad at first. He was home every afternoon when I got off the bus, and he would assemble peanut butter crackers for me while I complained about math class. I didn’t even know he was sad until his first car accident. After that, when I got off the bus, he would be in the garage. I would only see him at dinner.

They didn’t speak to each other much anymore.

A new car rolls onto our grassy yard. Two more people step out. If they’re lucky, there is still some deli meat left.

“It’s nice to have my own space,” he said when I asked why he spent so much time in the garage.

My mother didn’t look up from her plate.

I have my own space.

“I’ve got to keep my hands busy,” he added.

She sawed her knife through a piece of dry chicken.

I keep my hands busy.

“Can you pass the salad?” she interjected. She volunteered to stay late at work most nights, and he stayed put in the garage.

I blamed her for his drinking.

My fingers pry a sizable piece of bark away from the tree. I turn it over in my hands, feeling its uneven edges.

I didn’t know this would become a habit. It started after she and I fought for the first time. I stomped out of the living room, jogged across the yard, and pulled myself up into the branches. I picked away at the bark until my nails were jammed with black splinters and my fingertips were ripped open.

I blamed her for this habit, too.

Two of my great aunts solemnly walk toward a blue sedan. The abundance of cars in front of our house masks the absence of his. Soon they will all go back to their homes, leaving just my mother, some assorted deli meat, and an empty garage here with me.

Help Wanted

He dropped another cigarette into the water, marking his wake with a trail of tobacco in case anyone were to come looking for him. Without taking his eyes from the foamy surface of the broken waves, he fumbled for his pack. He shook out another, leaving three for later, and set it between his lips.

This was his favorite part of the cigarette: the way the tobacco tasted sweet on the tip of his tongue before it began to burn. He breathed in a lungful of salty air.

He used his shoulder to shove the swollen front door open. The apartment was in the same condition it was when he left that morning. The furniture, if it could be rewarded such a term of endearment, was a collection of hand-me-downs and side-of-the-road saves. A permanent dampness had woven itself into each surface and marked the air with a distinct smell of must and mildew. His mother's voice floated through his mind whenever he opened the door, chiding him, "This ain't no place to raise a baby."

He stepped into the kitchen where the dusty fan was running. It was no match for the thick August heat, but it did make breathing easier, at least temporarily. He pulled off

his t-shirt, painted with sweat, and sat in a wobbly wooden chair in front of the fan. The moisture on his body made the scar along his left side shine like an award. He closed his eyes, and if it weren't for the smell, he could almost forget he was here.

Another body heaved the sticky door open, a baby on her hip. He opened his eyes wide and adjusted his posture.

"What are you doing home?" The weariness in her voice was almost as impenetrable as the grime.

The hum of the fan filled up the silence.

"Oh my God, again? Are you serious?"

The heat had made their daughter's eyes heavy with sleep. Her mother exhaled sharply through her nose, marched into the kitchen, and ripped the fan's cord from the wall. It was the only one they had, and their daughter's comfort took precedence. She picked up the fan from the countertop with her free arm and carried them into the bedroom.

The air expanded in his lungs with the return of the heat, and he felt as though they might explode. The condensation on his chest dripped down his abdomen and collected in his navel. His mouth was a desert.

A door closed.

"Again?" She moved to the sink and filled a cup with lukewarm tap water.

He swallowed imaginary spit. "It's different this time."

"It's different? So, you still have a job?" Her eyes were wide.

He longed for the fan. "No," he said in a low voice, evading eye contact.

"Then it's not different."

“Yes, it is,” he insisted, straightening his back.

“Then tell me how getting fired this time isn’t the same as the other times.”

He inhaled the toxic air. “This time I quit.”

“Are you fucking serious...” she trailed off. She turned and stared out the warped window above the sink. It looked out onto the building’s parking lot. Her dented blue sedan was parked next to his rusted white pickup truck.

“Did you expect me to work at Rite Aid forever selling greeting cards and cigarettes to kids with fake IDs?”

Her eyes were vacant. She didn’t move.

“I wasn’t happy.”

She turned her head toward him slowly, but she remained silent.

“I’m not happy.” It was a declaration.

A giggle bubbled out of her throat, startling him. “You idiot.” Laughter exploded from her chest like a bomb from her pressurized lungs. Her abdomen shook beneath her gray t-shirt emblazoned with their high school’s name and spotted with sweat. He graduated, but she had not. “Well, I’m living every little girl’s dream.”

He stood without moving, immobilized by her outburst. “I know,” he began slowly, “this isn’t what you want either.” Her laughter quieted. “I’m trying to do something about it.”

“Then keep a fucking job.”

He reached for the pack of cigarettes sitting on the table. He tapped one out of the half-empty box. He pulled a lighter from his pocket, tasted the sweet tobacco on his tongue, and ignited it.

“You know what would make me happy, Coop?”

He sucked in, the end of the cigarette glowing red.

“To be able to afford another fucking fan.”

He exhaled a smoky breath.

“That’s my dream. That’s all. When I unlock that goddamn door, I just want to shove the damn thing open and see a fan sitting in the middle of the floor one day. Or maybe see the room full of fans. Fifty fans all blowing cool air at me, all covering the floor and the walls and hiding the filth. How fucked up is that?”

“Jesus, Meg, then I’ll just buy you a fan.”

“Just get a job.”

She gulped her water. He watched the liquid glide into her mouth, and he was reminded of his own thirst. He took another long drag, filling his lungs with the hot smoke. A bead of sweat rolled down his chest.

“I remember when you drew me pictures and slid them into my locker.” He exhaled, pushing all of the smoke out of his body.

“Me too.”

“That feels like a long time ago.” His cigarette was almost finished. He held it between his fingers and watched it disappear.

She finished her water and set the glass in the sink.

Sweat dripped down his neck and pooled in his collarbone.

“Go get a job.” She stepped past him, a tiny breath of cool air in her wake. She pulled his crumpled shirt off the floor and tossed it onto his chest. “Get a job and I’ll be happy.”

He stuffed the butt into the ashtray and put his damp shirt on again. He grabbed the almost-empty pack of cigarettes from the table, stuffed it in his back pocket, and left through the swollen door.

As he backed out of his parking spot, he saw her watching from the window. His white truck left her blue car alone.

He drove until he reached the ocean, and then he kept going.

The breeze from the top deck of the ferry threatened to steal the cigarette from his lips. He clenched it tighter with his teeth and finally lit the end. He turned around, leaning his back against the sturdy metal railing. He could see the top of his truck parked on the deck, wedged between the other vehicles. The boat steadily heaved away from land. He exhaled. The wind carried the smoke away from him.

He put the cigarette back to his lips and watched the island develop on the horizon.

Boat Ride

She could tell he wasn't accustomed to the presence of strangers.

"We can't thank you enough for giving us a lift."

He tightened his gaze straight ahead and nodded.

Forty-five minutes until they would reach the island.

"I've only been out here once. I was too young to remember much, though."

The motor roared and the boat swayed.

Emily sat on an upturned bucket tied in place with frayed rope, and her young daughter leaned against her lap.

"This is Abigail's first time on a boat," she said, securing her right arm around her daughter's waist. Abby nodded, her chin hitting the neck of the oversized red lifejacket strapped to her. A curl of yellow hung from the back of her purple baseball cap.

Emily's own hair streaked her squinted vision. She had left her hat in the car to bake in the passenger seat sun. This same sun, magnified by the water, seeped into her skin and reminded her that after she had applied a thick layer of SPF 50 to Abby, she hadn't put any on herself.

The lobsterman cleared his throat. “You’ve got to get to the boat early next time. Twenty minutes at least.” She almost couldn’t hear him over the noise. “Else you’ll miss it.”

His thick accent shrouded his consonants.

“Next time,” she said.

“Lucky I was around today. I’m not usually on the mainland.” He steered around a buoy.

“There was a lot of traffic this morning,” she replied, holding Abby tighter as the boat turned.

The best a mother can hope to be is good enough, she reminded herself. She had cut this line out of a parenting magazine and tucked it in her wallet. Good enough meant that as long as she put sunscreen on her kid and tied an enormous lifejacket around her, it was okay that they missed the ferry.

“Would have had to wait till the noon boat.”

“We were backed up for miles.”

“Who knows if you would have even made that one, since the boat fills up real quick with all the summer people.” He kept his eyes on the water.

“And then *someone* had to go pee, so we had to find a place to stop.” She squeezed her daughter.

“Shouldn’t rely on this happening again next time.”

Emily shifted on her makeshift stool, loosening her grip on her daughter. “We really do appreciate your help. This was just a one-time mistake.”

Abby slipped out of her mother's grasp and swayed several feet to a tall white bucket.

"Careful, Abigail," her mother warned, reaching an arm out to steady her.

She peered into the bucket. Her blonde ponytail flapped at her mother.

She looked up at the lobsterman, whose eyes were still fastened on their distant destination, then looked back to the bucket. "It's moving!" she whispered to herself. She plunged her arm into the watery bucket and grabbed a lobster, her small hand wrapped around its tail. The lobster thrashed its claws

"Abigail, put that down!" Emily looped her fingers through the strap on Abby's lifejacket to pull her away from the bucket.

"There's stuff on its tummy!"

The lobster's abdomen was teeming with small black beads.

"Put it back! Those are its eggs!" Emily lunged forward, scooped up the agitated lobster, and flung it back into the bucket.

"It's on me!" A few dark dots peppered her right hand. Abby let out a sharp squeal.

"Jesus Christ!" The lobsterman jerked the wheel to the right.

Abby squealed again.

"Jesus Christ, stop screaming!"

"Just wipe them off, Abs." Emily rubbed her daughter's hand on her lifejacket, grinding the eggs into thin black stripes. "It's okay."

The motor slowed its roar. The lobsterman turned away from the wheel and leaned down to meet Abby's eyes. "Don't touch that lobster again."

Abby obediently nodded her head.

Emily locked her arm around her. She met the lobsterman's gaze. "Excuse me, it was an accident." The motor growled. "Is it even legal to have a pregnant one onboard?"

His eyes dove to the lobster. "I was going to throw her back." He stood up and returned to his station, manning the wheel again. "When I catch one, sometimes I keep her on board for the rest of the day. Safer up here than down there, I figure. I always put them back at the end of the day, though." The boat picked up speed.

"What happens if you get caught with one?"

He dodged another buoy. "Small fine. But I always throw them back."

Emily kissed the top of Abby's head. "We'll be there soon," she whispered into her hat.

As long as she held on tight to her daughter and wiped the goop off her hands, it was okay that they got a ride from a lobsterman temporarily harboring illegal lobsters.

Thirty more minutes until they would reach the island.

Dice Hearts II

Crash.

A purple stain spreads across her customer's white capri pants like a fresh bruise.

"Shit."

The silence following a crash is deafening. The echo stabs her ears.

"You ruined my—"

"I am so sorry!" Her voice shakes as she watches the anger swell in her customer's face.

"My pants! You ruined my pants!"

"I'm sorry, let me help you clean that—"

"There's no point."

"I could see if I could get you a free dessert?"

Her customer breathes in deeply, the kind of breath that transforms the desire to shout into a whispered rage. "I don't want free food. I want a waitress who isn't so incompetent. Please, just bring me another glass of wine."

She straightens her back and fills her lungs with hot summer air. “Sure thing.” She reaches for a wine glass from the adjacent table and empties its contents onto the woman’s perfectly ironed shirt.

Her hands shake from adrenaline while she unties her floral apron. She leaves it on the bar in front of her boss, whose face is still frozen with disbelief. The other patrons, in awe, turn and watch the newly unemployed waitress step through the doorway. She lands in the heavy sunlight and purposefully turns left.

She follows a well-worn path to the beach until her sneakers sink into the heavy, burning sand. Her feet, on autopilot, guide her to the edge of the lapping waves. From this side of the island, she sees the hazy skyline of a city she can hardly believe exists anymore.

She focuses her eyes on the chipped black paint of the lobster boat idling along the waves. *Dice Hearts*. She ponders the name, turning it over in her mind like a smooth stone. *Dice Hearts*.

You get what you get.

She removes her sneakers, stuffing her socks into the toes. Her legs stretch into the chilly water and the salt sticks to her smooth skin.

She left, and now her mother lives alone in their empty house.

She wades in deeper, the waves touching her kneecaps.

She ran, but the memories followed.

The bottoms of her shorts are logged with water.

She escaped to an island she’d never been, but she wasn’t free.

Her shirt is heavy.

She was running from what she carried inside of her.

She takes her feet off the sand and swims.

She is surrounded by water. She could go anywhere.

Sometimes, there's nowhere to go.

The Scenes

Eavesdropping: A Monologue

She marched right up to the bar, dripping with red wine, and told the manager just what she thought of that little show back there. *Pause.* Oh, it's not eavesdropping if she's shouting. We couldn't help but overhear. Rick and I were just trying to enjoy our pear and goat cheese salads – yes, they were magnificent! Oh, but if you go, ask for the vinaigrette on the side, otherwise they'll absolutely drown the arugula. So there she is, shouting at the manager who's just standing there in stunned silence. And I can't blame this woman for being so upset. The waitress drenched her in two glasses of wine, and then stormed out! If it had been me, I wouldn't have let her get away so quickly. So she's completely lost all semblance of decorum, understandably so – her white pants were irrevocably ruined – and now she's accusing the manager. "I expect more from this establishment!" "I suggest holding your employees to some semblance of standards in the future." Things like that.

Oh, it was quite a scene! The manager assured her that her meal would be free of charge and she even promised that the waitress would no longer have a job. The woman paused for a moment, sucking in a big gulp of air, and then lowered her voice. I had to

strain my ears to listen. No, it's not eavesdropping! I'd been listening for five minutes now, so I was invested. In any case, she lowered her voice and explained that she was only on the island to see a lobsterman who she hadn't seen in a while. She has to talk to him about something. The older gentlemen at the table adjacent to us had a coughing fit—the croutons were a tad dry, I must say—so I couldn't hear everything. But from what I understand, it was her only outfit she had with her, and it was ruined. I saw she was wearing a ring, so I was hoping she was here for some sort of illicit affair. Wouldn't that have been exciting? Rick didn't think so. But she said, "I need to apologize."

So she does all this, shouts at a waitress, shouts at the manager, shouts until she's blue in the face, all because she wants to apologize to a lobsterman. God, I hope it's an affair.

Alice and Bill: A Scene

Alice sits across from Bill, her husband of the past 52 years, at their small kitchen table. They each have a mug of coffee and a plate. There's a jar of strawberry jam and a butter knife on the table. Between them, the sections of the day's newspaper are sprawled across the small surface, and they are each reading an open section. Bill reads contently and intently, while Alice flips through the pages, something else clearly on her mind.

BILL

There's an article in here about the new bridge. Says they're gonna start construction in a few weeks. Says it'll triple the number of people on the island next summer. Christ sakes, it's already busy enough out here. Tourists walking in the middle of the roads. Can't find a decent parking spot after 9 AM. What in God's name do they need the bridge for?

Alice does not look up.

Alice? *Beat.*

ALICE

Bill?

BILL

Mmm?

ALICE

We never got a dog.

BILL

(Looking over his paper) What?

ALICE

We never got a dog. Remember when the boys were little, we
always talked about getting a dog?

BILL

Yes...

ALICE

Well, I just realized we never got one.

BILL

Three boys and a dog would have been a handful, Al, that's why we
never got one.

ALICE

We *never* got a dog, though. The boys have been grown for years,
and we never got one.

BILL

Are you saying that you would like to get a dog?

ALICE

No. I'm just saying that we never did, is all. (*Pause.*) Why is that?

Bill puts his paper down.

Why is it that we never got a dog?

BILL

We got older, slowed down. Didn't make too much sense to get one,
I guess.

ALICE

Didn't you ever want a dog, Bill?

BILL

I guess so. I've never thought about it much. You all right, Al?

ALICE

Hmm? Oh, yes, I'm fine. *Beat.* Would you like some more coffee?

*Alice gets up from her seat and walks to the coffee pot on the
counter. She fidgets while she pours herself another cup.*

She is distracted. Her back is to Bill.

BILL

I'm all set. *(He takes a sip of coffee.)* What got you thinking about getting a dog, anyhow?

ALICE

It's just something we'll never have done.

BILL

Sure, but there's lots of things we've never done. We never jumped out of an airplane, either.

ALICE

No, no, you're right. I'm just thinking too much, is all.

BILL

Never stole a car. Never voted for Nixon. Never moved to Massachusetts.

ALICE

Never!

BILL

So it's good we didn't do some things.

Alice turns around and sits back down in her chair.

ALICE

You're right, Bill. Don't mind me, rambling on like an old lady.

BILL

What's the matter, Al?

Beat.

ALICE

Just thinking about dogs and jam.

BILL

Jam? What about jam?

ALICE

That's it. You bought strawberry jam.

BILL

Alice, we've been buying strawberry jam for the past fifty years. If I
were certain about anything, it's what kind of jam you like.

ALICE

I'm not mad that you bought it, I've just been thinking.

BILL

About jam.

ALICE

About what the jam *represents*.

BILL

What it represents?

ALICE

We buy strawberry jam and we eat it on our toast while we drink
coffee and read the paper. Every day. Come hell or high water, we
sit here and drink our coffee, read the paper, and eat strawberry jam
on toast.

BILL

We only do it because it's what we like to do. We eat the jam because it's the kind we prefer. And after 50-odd years of sitting at this kitchen table, I assumed it's what you liked to do, too.

ALICE

It is what I like to do. But maybe I like blackberry jam better, and what if I never find out? Then I'll have sat here every morning for 50-odd years eating strawberry jam on toast, drinking coffee, and reading the paper, when I *could* have been having *blackberry* jam on toast, drinking my coffee, and reading the paper.

BILL

I don't see much of a difference there, Al.

ALICE

It's what the jam *represents*, Bill.

BILL

Which is?

ALICE

The jam is us, Bill. We're the jam.

There's a knock at the door. Their neighbor, Betty, pokes her head in their front door (off of their kitchen).

BETTY

Good morning!

Betty and Bill glance at each other.

BILL

Come on in, Betty.

BETTY

I got some of your mail yesterday, thought I'd bring it by.

ALICE

Thanks, Betty!

Alice extends her hand to take the mail, but Betty begins to flip through it as she steps into the kitchen.

BETTY

Let's see. We've got your plumbing bill from Steve, looks like he overcharged you for that running tank again. VFWs are asking for another donation...see, you give them money one time and they think you're a bottomless pit of money. We're on a fixed income. We can't just hand out blank checks left and right! We've got bills to pay, and--

ALICE

Betty.

BETTY

Right. L.L. Bean fall catalog - (*speaking to Alice*) there's a great sweater on page 56, I bent the page for you.

ALICE

Thanks, Betty, I can--

BETTY

I think you'd look great in the deep plum.

Betty hands the mail over to Alice.

BILL

Has Stew gone down'ta the store?

BETTY

Yes, he left about five minutes ago. Gotta get the gossip on the island.

ALICE

Obviously.

BETTY

I've got a busy schedule. I go to bridge club on Monday, book club on Tuesday, afternoon tea on Wednesday, knitting club on Thursday (and let me tell you, the other ladies there are a *drag*), lunch with the girls on Friday, pancake breakfast down'ta the Lions' Club on Saturday, and church on Sunday morning. It's *exhausting*, but it keeps me in the loop.

BILL

I don't know if you could be much more in the loop than that.

BETTY

Speaking of which, I've got to go get ready for book club. We're reading *Jane Eyre*. Terrible book, but I'll get to hear all about Sandra's daughter's divorce. And Phyllis is making scones! I'll see you later!

BILL & ALICE

Bye, Betty!

Betty leaves and the kitchen is silent. Beat.

BILL

Well, it seems like everything is not strawberry jam with her.

ALICE

No, that's for sure.

BILL

Doesn't sit still long enough to eat jam, even.

ALICE

She seems like it's more...marmalade with her.

BILL

Or fruitcake.

Alice organizes the pile of mail. She takes a sip of coffee.

ALICE

Just imagine if we bought blackberry jam. Have you ever tried
blackberries?

BILL

Of course I've had blackberries!

ALICE

Just imagine them spread on toast.

BILL

I'm sure that'd be real nice, Al.

ALICE

I don't think you're imagining it right.

BILL

What do you mean?

ALICE

Just imagine biting into all those seeds. Imagine the crunch!

BILL

Strawberries have seeds, too.

ALICE

Yes, but not *blackberry* seeds!

BILL

I s'pose not. I saw at the store they sell triple berry jam nowadays.

ALICE

Imagine that! Triple the crunch! Let's get some triple berry jam
next time we go to the store.

BILL

I just bought another jar of strawberry a couple days ago.

Beat.

ALICE

Oh. Well, then. Maybe after this next jar runs out.

BILL

That would be nice.

*They are both quiet. Bill returns to his paper. Two slices of bread
pop up from the toaster.*

End Scene.

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Artist's Biography

Bailey O'Brien was born in Portland, Maine on April 21, 1992. She was raised in Gorham, Maine where she graduated from Gorham High School in 2010. At the University of Maine, Bailey studied English with a concentration in creative writing. During her time at UMaine, she performed with the improvisational comedy group Improv in Sanity, which she later directed. Additionally, Bailey is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the All Maine Women Honor Society, and the Sophomore Eagles Honor Society.

After graduation, Bailey plans to move to Boston where she hopes to pursue her passions for writing and comedy in whatever capacity that may be.